Musical News and Happenings

Amsterdam Festival Recalls Centenary Of Cesar Franck

Willem Mengelberg and his orchestra, the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, will give, it is announced, a César Franck festival concert at Amsterdam and at The Hague on December 7 and 8, in which Eleanor Spencer, the American pianist, will play the Symphonic Variations—which calls attention to the approaching hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the most attractive characters in the history of music. César Franck may be considered to have led a peaceful, happy life, even though he did not begin to win general recognition until the year before his death. The neglect and opposition shown toward him in reigning French musical circles might have stirred a musician possessing the traditional "temperament" to fury, but Franck took it philosophically, even cheerfully. His life was one of continuous hard work, spent largely in teaching pupils of all kinds, some promising, many the reverse; a life without any sensational incidents, but always devoted to his music.

César Franck was born at Liege, in Belgium, on December 10, 1822, in a region which Vincent d'Indy finds very like central France in appearance, but "German in customs and surroundings." His family was descended from a line of painters, which explains the composer's considerable talent for drawing. His father, termed by D'Indy "a man of stern and autocratic character," decided that César and his brother should become professional musicians, and entered him at the Liege Music School. At the age of ten, on a tour of Belgium, César met a famous child-musician only a year older than himself, the singer Pauline Garcia, afterward Mme. Viardot. Two years later he completed his course at the Liege school, and in 1836 the Francks moved to Paris. César entered the Conservatoire in 1837, studying composition and pianoforte, and soon won the award "proxime accessit" for fugue.

Signs of the composer's originality appeared in the pianoforte competition of 1848, when, after an excellent performance of Hummel's A Minor Concerto, the young musician conceived the idea of transposing the piece set before him to a key one-third lower, and forthwith did so with equal ease. He obviously deserved the first prize, but Cherubini, then at the head of the Conservatoire, was shocked at the innovation and refused to award it, but finally recognized Franck's performance by proposing a special award called "Grand Prix d'Honneur." This was the only time, according to M. d'Indy, in the history of the Conservatoire, that such a prize was ever given. Franck won the second prize for fugue in the competition of 1839, horrifying his father by finishing his examination and walking out long before the closing order, with all the others still struggling with the questions. The elder Franck reproved him for this apparent carelessness, but the young man only smiled, and answered, "I think it is all right."

He won the first prize for fugue in 1840, in spite of an ungrateful set subject, and the next year, as a pupil of André Benoit, competed for the organ prize. The tests are traditional—devising an accompaniment for plain chant chosen for the occasion, the performance of an organ piece with pedal and the improvisations of a fugue and of a piece in sonata form on themes chosen by the examiners. Here Franck's love of originality found another opportunity, and he treated the subjects simultaneously, a brilliant performance, but its length of development quite bewildered the examiners, who at first proposed to award him nothing, but eventually gave him a second prize.

Franck was beginning his preparations for the Prix de Rome, but suddenly, in April, 1842, his father removed him from the Conservatoire and told him to prepare for the career of a virtuoso pianist. This, observes D'Indy, was just the period when such pianists were having their greatest vogue, when Liszt and Thalberg, for instance, held the center of the stage in the capitals of Europe. Such careers had dazzled the elder Franck, who was determined on a similar fame for his sons. César returned to Belgium and complied with his father's wishes. In the life which he now was leading there was little opportunity for serious study, but these two years were not entirely barren. His three trios were dedicated to King Leopold, in the hope that royal recognition would carry the young pianist far forward on his road to celebrity. But the King failed to respond, and in 1844 the Francks returned to Paris, taking an apartment on the Rue de la Bruyere, where they lived on the money earned by the sons.

Times were hard, and César had to devote every minute of the day to teaching, while he managed, nevertheless, to find regular time for composition. He led a life of regular and unceasing industry, during which, remarks M. d'Indy, "his sole diversion was a concert—at rare intervals—at which one of his own works was given." His "Biblical eclogue," "Ruth," written in 1846, had its first performance in the concert room of the Conservatoire, but was condemned as a poor imitation of Felicien David's "Le Desert."

Meanwhile, making a living grew increasingly difficult, as the disturbances of 1848 were driving his richer pupils out of Paris. But such was the time that Franck chose to get married. His bride was the daughter of a well known tragedian, a fact which scandalized the composer's parents. The idea of marrying a "theatrical person"! The wedding itself, held at the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette, where Franck was organist, was not without its difficulties. It was February 22, 1848, with the Revolution in full swing, and, in order to reach the church, the wedding party had to climb a barricade with the willing aid of the insurgents behind it. His marriage brought about his decision to live away from his parents, while he had to work even harder than before; but, even in this period of high pressure, he determined to set aside an hour or two every day as "time for thought."

This quiet but incessantly busy life of teaching, with his work as organist and hours set apart for composition, was followed by him for many years. His fortunes during the next ten years began slowly to improve. He became organist at the Church of St. Jean-St. François, and in 1858 was given command of the new organ in the basilica of Ste. Clotilde.

"Here," writes D'Indy, "in the dusk of the organ loft, of which I cannot speak without emotion, he spent the best part of his life." . . . "Ah," he continues, "we know it well, we who were his pupils, the way up to the thrice-blessed organ loft—a way as steep and difficult as that which the Gospel tells us leads to Paradise. First, having climbed the dark, spiral staircase, lit by an occasional loophole, we suddenly came face to face with a kind of antediluvian monster, a complicated bony structure breathing heavily and irregularly, which on close examination proved to be the vital portion of the organ, worked by a vigorous pair of bellows. Next we had to descend a narrow steps in pitch darkness, a fatal ordeal to high hats and the cause of many a slip to the uninitiated. Opening the narrow "janua coeli," we found ourselves suspended, as it were, midway between the pavement and the vaulted roof of the church, and the next moment all was forgotten in the contemplation of that rapt profile and the intellectual brow from which seemed to flow without any effort a stream of inspired melody and subtle, exquisite harmonies which lingered for a moment among the pillars of the nave before they ascended and died away in the vaulted heights of the roof. Franck had, or rather was, the genius of improvisation. In 1880 Liszt left the church in amazement, . . . invoking the name of Bach in an inevitable comparison." On the street, hurrying from class to class, he was described by a publisher as "a man always in a hurry, always dressed in black, and who wore his trousers too short."

His next ten years were quiet and devoted to church music, but the year of 1870 inspired his patriotic spirit—he had already been naturalized as a Frenchman. He wrote an "Ode to Paris," inspired by a panegyric in the "Figaro," on her gallant resistance, but it proved to be no time for triumphal music. His "Redemption" was produced in 1873 at a "Concert Spirituel," but it proved to be a wretched performance. Colonne, the conductor, was inexperienced at the time, while a more pretentious oratorio of another composer took most of the time for rehearsal. The only one of Franck's friends who seemed satisfied was Franck himself.

Recognition for his genius was gradually developing. In 1888 he became a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, not as a composer, but as a "Professor of Organ." "Decidedly," says D'Indy with indignation, "the French government was not happy in its dealings with him." But a successful performance of his string quartet in 1890 led Franck to observe: "You see, they are beginning at last to understand me." But he could not live to see the full measure of that understanding; he was struck by the pole of an omnibus in May of that year, and, though he kept up his busy life, he never fully recovered. In the autumn he caught pleurisy, and died in November. A modest funeral was held in his own church of Ste. Clotilde, and he was quietly buried in the Montrouge Cemetery, and, a few years later, at Montparnasse.

Music Notes

Miss Florence Macbeth, American coloratura soprano of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, has just started on a thirty weeks' concert tour, which will take her to practically every state in the Union, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Miss Macbeth, in addition, will also sing in a number of performances with the Chicago Opera toward the end of the season.

Bruno Walter, who will direct three concerts of the New York Symphony Orchestra this season, has had the title of professor conferred upon him by the Bavarian government.

Norman Johnston, barytone, will give his first New York recital in Aeolian Hall on Monday afternoon, November 6, at 3 o'clock.

Paderewski has always maintained that one of the secrets of his success was his ability to concentrate.

A visitor at his Swiss home last summer tells of hearing the sound of the piano coming from his study. Naturally he stopped to listen and gradually realized that Paderewski was playing only a phrase of six notes from one of the Chopin etudes. Finally the listener began to count and when Paderewski went to another phrase he had counted fifty-three repetitions of those six notes. How many times he had played this before the listener began to count no one knows. A remarkable illustration of "the capacity for taking pains," Paderewski was working out certain dynamic and color effects in that phrase and he kept at it until he got what he wanted.

Helen Bock, a young American pianist, will play in New York early in the spring.

There is a touch of novelty in the coming first American appearance at Aeolian Hall, Saturday evening, November 18, of Mme. Gita Glaze, the Russian prima donna, largely because of the dramatic incidents that surrounded her popularity in Russia before the fall of the Romanoffs and thereafter her thrilling flight across the Russian border and her final landing in America.

Mme. Glaze, though less than thirty-two years old, has sung before the crowned heads of Europe during the period when she was prima donna at the Imperial Opera House of Moscow and Petrograd.

She was born to wealth, married to a wealthy cable manufacturer of Tiflis and had before the revolution everything that the heart of woman could desire. Mme. Glaze and her husband were turned out of their beautiful home, their property was confiscated and with only her jewels they were compelled to flee, making their way to Constantinople and from there coming to America.